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Orv Owens

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# What Was It Like Grandpa?

By Orv Owens

## **"Wasn't a picnic; that's for sure.**

Dark clouds hovered over America like monkeys on our backs. Hunger stalked the land. Not hunger for the belly, boy. Hunger for a better life.

"It was a time to work like the devil for your pay. And you sweated, boy. There wasn't air-conditioning to cool you in the summertime, but we did have heat. Some folks had wood stoves for cooking and heating, and some folks in the city had gas. At one time or another, we lived in town and out.

"That big old falling-down house ten miles out in the country had a big fireplace, and I had to cut wood for it after I hoofed it three miles home from school—through all kinds of weather—just like the mailman did—never could cut enough wood to last the night for that fireplace. It would have helped if I could have hit twice in the same spot—like Papa.

"No sir. Never had enough wood cut, and Papa cursing every time he had to cut wood after a hard day at the fishery (hatchery).

"Those folks who had regular jobs used to accuse Papa of having broken the most

shovel handles—by leaning on them.

"Wasn't true.

Nobody worked harder than Papa. I can say that because I witnessed the fact. Besides, if they had leaned on shovels that much, the P.W.A. (W.P.A.) couldn't have built all those school houses, bridges,

and fish hatcheries still in existence today.

"There was that house on Pine Street that had imitation brick siding on it. Three rooms and an attic. It wasn't any better or worse than the rest in our neighborhood.

Everyone was in the same situation those days. If you'd told them they were poor, they'd have thought you nuts. When everyone's poor, it's the same as being rich, and folks don't think about it much. They just dig in and pray a lot.

"Two things I remember about that house. I remember the rose bush by the front porch vividly. The reason I do is because I stripped off my clothes and went swimming naked in the creek bisecting our neighborhood. Papa didn't like me running around like that in the wintertime or breaking the ice on the water either. You can guess what happened between the rose bush and me.

"Papa didn't think we could afford doctor bills on his salary, but that rose bush never failed to bloom. It made a spot of color in a drab neighborhood and a spot of color on my posterior, too.

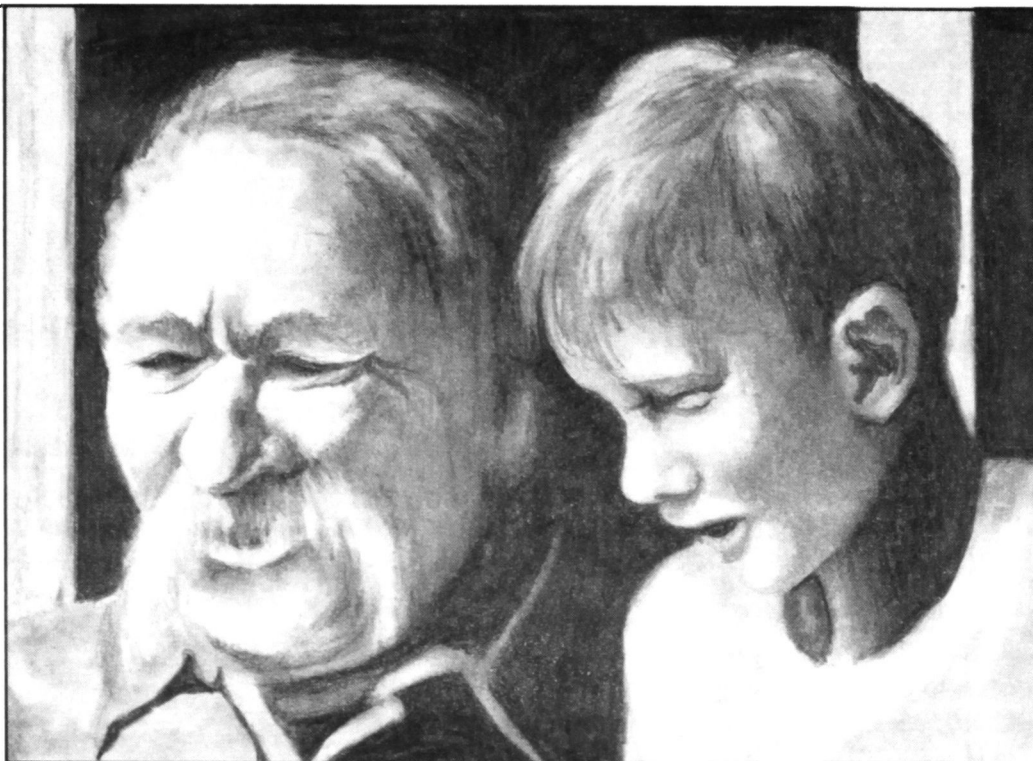
"Funny how you remember things like that, and sparrows in the attic. I just thought I had problems until I listened to those sparrows night after night. At first I felt kind of haunted by them, but after a few nights, I ignored scratching and arguments.

"Another house we lived in was in black town across the tracks west. It was as though the railroad tracks tried to segregate races. Times have changed now. Nobody tries to tell folks where to live.

"It was so much like the other houses we lived in; it was right painful to live there. Even the blacks kept their distance from us. We must have seemed like sorry trash indeed. What it taught me was that being white is no better or worse than being black. You just have to do the best you can with what talents you have—if any—and let the devil take the hindmost.

"The most colorful house (dugout is what I called it) of all was that home in the side of a hill. It looked strange out in the country that way with cows threatening to graze on the roof. All the time you're

**"It was a time to work like the devil for your pay."**



Artwork by Cindy Fast

hoping they won't knock your stovepipe down.

"Mama killed many a scorpion in that dugout. She tried to keep five boys and two girls safe from danger in that cow pasture home.

"We went to a country school about a mile and a half from our house—just across the pasture to the west. It was like other country one-room schools of that era.

"It was an era of faded work pants with patched rears and aviator caps Mama made out of scraps to keep our ears warm.

"Some of the kids used to poke fun at those caps, jerk them off, and stomp on them.

"That's when I discovered some bullies are as tough as their mouths say they are. And they believed in cap stomping and fight starting.

"Won a few, always on an empty stomach. Notice you get real mad over nothing when you're empty, too.

"What was the furniture like? You'll probably never sleep on one of those old iron bedsteads with four brothers to keep you company. Wasn't too bad unless one of 'em had a hangnail to scratch your nose with, whether it needed it or not, or worse, a brother who wet the bed.

"We used kerosene lamps until Papa got rich enough to afford electricity when we moved to town. Back then, we thought we

had it made if we had gas and electricity. And if we'd had something besides one-dish meals of beans and cornbread, potatoes, and biscuits or water gravy and biscuits to eat, we'd have thought we were in hog heaven.

"No such place? What's all this prove? "If you can survive a depression, you can survive anything.

Someone has to pave the way. You get my meaning?

"Table? No, we didn't eat off the floor. We had an old battered oak table and matching chairs. A coal oil lamp sat in the middle of the red and white oilcloth-covered table in the evenings. It shined through the window and welcomed me home on many a dark and scary night.

"You say you've got enough for your report? I certainly hope so. Lord only knows how long it'll be before you ask me anything else. What are you thanking me for? That's what Grampas are for." \*

*(ORV OWENS writes a column for the WATONGA REPUBLICAN and submits articles for publication in WESTVIEW.)*